Mereworth and World War II

Memories and Researches

Mereworth Women's Institute at work making jam for the War Effort in August 1943 (from "A Green & Pleasant Land" by Ursula Buchan)

Scan the QR code for an oral history of one Mereworth resident's war

Introduction

This booklet has been produced to mark the 80th anniversary of D-Day. It has been generously funded by the Mereworth Parish Council in memory of our own George Noel Sparks, a merchant seaman whose ship was torpedoed during the D-Day campaign. This booklet is therefore being sold in aid of The Merchant Navy Association, as well as the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund to honour Mereworth's long and proud association with the RAF.

We owe so much to the men and women of the Great Generation who served in World War Two. I very much hope that this booklet will bring to life those years during which our country faced its greatest peril, and show how the people in one small village responded to it with courage, good humour and resolve.

In commemoration of D-Day, Admiral Sir Ben Key writes: *On 6 June 1944, Operations Neptune and Overlord unfolded. Meticulously planned, they set the stage for one of humanity's most audacious military campaigns as the Allies sought to retake Western Europe from the Nazis. The values that those involved were fighting for are ones that we continue to uphold – peace, freedom and democracy*. Please scan this QR code for more:

Contents

Introduction	Page 3
The Mereworth Fallen of World War Two	Page 5
Personal Accounts of the War Years	Page 27
Memories of Mereworth	Page 45
Mereworth in the War Newspapers	Page 47
The Wartime Parish Magazine	Page 48
Mereworth School in Wartime	Page 50
The Church in Wartime	Page 56
Mereworth Prisoner of War Camp	Page 59
Mereworth Women and the War Effort	Page 60
References and Acknowledgements	Page 63

Lachlan Thomas Hayward – the last of the Mereworth fallen in World War 2

The Mereworth Fallen of World War Two

Unlike our First World War memorial, which records the names of all those villagers who served in that conflict, our two Second World War memorials record only those who fell. We have no record of those who served. Not even the newspapers of the 1940s give any information about the nine men whose lives were lost; we have more information about our First World War combatants. Finding photographs of our World War Two heroes has been especially challenging. The following pages attempt to give some background on the nine brave men shown on our Second World War Memorials as we approach the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Europe.

Some current long-term Mereworth residents may still recognise the surnames of the fallen. Some may even be related to them and have further information about them. The Great Generation that won the war against tyranny is, however, passing. First-hand accounts will soon no longer be heard. Too few wrote down their memories. Surviving stories become harder to trace as families move away from the village which these nine men knew so well.

By drawing together their stories from the sources we still have, we and future generations will not only recognise the great sacrifice these nine heroes made, but also will appreciate that we should never take for granted the freedoms they defended and won for our country. It is sobering to know that three of the men were still teenagers when they died, and only one was over the age of 24. They should never be forgotten.

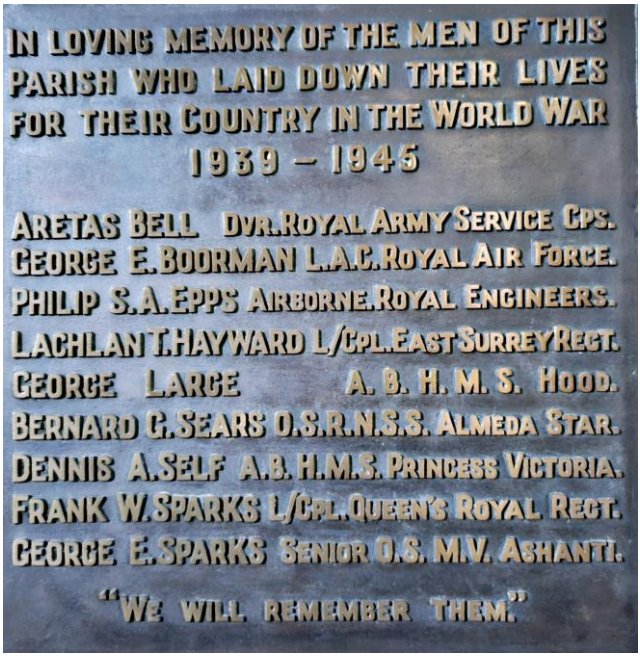
Areatas Bell (service number T/67696)

Areatas's Commonwealth War Graves Commission records show him as *the son of Areatas and Minnie Bell; husband of Eliza Kate Bell, of Offham, Kent*. Areatas had been baptised at Saint Lawrence's church Mereworth on 8th September 1901, with the rector spelling his name as "*Aretas", the son of Aretas and Minnie Bell*. His father is recorded as a labourer at West Peckham in our Baptism Register.

The 1921 census shows Areatas as living with his family in Mereworth, aged 19 years and 10 months. He is recorded as being single and *a labourer at Terry & Co (quarry owner) at Offham*. Our Banns Register shows that "Aretas Bell" of Mereworth and Eliza Kate Morgan of Offham had their marriage banns read in Mereworth Church on 30th November, 7th December and 14th December 1924. Areatas does not appear in the mini-census conducted in 1939.

Areatas had held the rank of Driver in the Royal Army Service Corps. This Corps had kept the Army provisioned with everything except weapons and ammunition. Areatas was serving in the 3rd Armoured Division Troops Company when he was killed on 31st May 1940 aged 38. His remains were never found. He is remembered on the Dunkirk Memorial in France, as well as on the Mereworth and Offham War Memorials. His name is spelt "Aretas" on our War Memorial, the same spelling as in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 32. The Offham War Memorial simply records him as A. Bell.

Areatas had been part of the British Expeditionary Force that was pushed back to the beachhead at Dunkirk in northern France between 26th May and 4th June 1940. Over 330,000 troops were rescued from Dunkirk, but Areatas was probably killed during the relentless German attacks on those Allied troops during the retreat. His only child, Kathleen, a daughter who died childless, lived in Offham; she kept a photograph of him in uniform by her bedside until her death in 2010.


IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE MEN OF THIS
PARISH WHO LAID DOWN THEIR LIVES
FOR THEIR COUNTRY IN THE WORLD WAR
1939 – 1945
ARETAS BELL DVR. ROYAL ARMY SERVICE CPS.
GEORGE E. BOORMAN L.A.C. ROYAL AIR FORCE.
PHILIP S.A. EPPS AIRBORNE. ROYAL ENGINEERS.
LACHLAN T. HAYWARD L/CPL. EAST SURREY REGT.
GEORGE LARGE A. B. H. M. S. HOOD.
BERNARD G. SEARS O.S. R.N.S.S. ALMEDA STAR.
DENNIS A. SELF A.B. H.M.S. PRINCESS VICTORIA.
FRANK W. SPARKS L/CPL. QUEEN'S ROYAL REGT.
GEORGE E. SPARKS SENIOR O.S. M.V. ASHANTI.
"WE WILL REMEMBER THEM."

The Mereworth Church War Memorial to those who fell in World War Two
Note the alternative spelling of Areatas

George Edward Boorman (service number 913535)

George was baptised at Saint Lawrence's church Mereworth on 2nd March 1919 and grew up at 6 Pleasant Villas in Kent Street. Our Baptism Register records him as the son of Hubert George Boorman, a cycle engineer, and Maud Mary Boorman of Pleasant Villas, Mereworth. The 1921 census records George, aged 2 years and 5 months, living with his sister, Sylvia Jean (aged 5), mother, Maud Mary (aged 31) and father Hubert George (aged 43, and a cycle engineer) in Mereworth. George does not appear in the mini-census conducted in 1939. His father, Hubert, had helped Reginald Balston build the Mereworth aeroplane before the First World War. Hubert no doubt passed this aviation knowledge on to his son to inspire George to join the RAF.

George had held the rank of Leading Aircraftman in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. He was killed, probably in Malta, on 2nd March 1942 aged 23. The Nazis extensively bombed the island (which housed an overseas command of the RAF called Air Headquarters Malta) between June 1940 and November 1942. This hostile action became known as the Siege of Malta and it cost many lives. George is buried at the Malta (Capuccini) Naval Cemetery near Valetta (known locally as the Kalkara Military Cemetery). George's Commonwealth War Graves Commission records show him as *the son of Hubert George and Maud Mary Boorman, of Mereworth, Kent*.

The wartime memories of Mereworth written by the late Sylvia Clark (née Boorman) are recorded later in this booklet. Sylvia

made only one passing reference to her “late brother” George in her account of the war.

Left: George with his sister Sylvia (1920s)

Philip Sidney Epps (service number 14638749)

Philip had the rank of Sapper in the Royal Engineers, and had been based in the Medway towns. He was serving in the 4th Parachute Squadron when he was killed during Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands on 19th September 1944 aged 19. Philip was part of the Airborne Royal Engineers' contingent during the Battle of Arnhem which took place between 17th and 26th September 1944.

By the summer of 1944 Allied Forces had pushed through France and Belgium after the D-Day landings, and were poised to enter the Nazi-occupied Netherlands. Field Marshal Montgomery planned a single push northward over the Lower Rhine (codenamed Operation Market Garden) and sent the British First Airborne Division into Arnhem to capture bridges and secure the towns along the line of the Allied advance. Allied troops from the south had been expected to reach the British airborne forces in two to three days, but this did not happen, and the operation failed with significant loss of life. More than a thousand men of the Airborne Division died in the battle, nearly six thousand were captured or were recorded as missing. Fewer than two thousand made it back to the Allied lines.

Philip's squadron was raised to support the 4th Parachute Infantry Brigade for Operation Market Garden. Flying from the Spanhoe airfield at Glaston, Leicestershire, Philip dropped with 4th Para west of Arnhem at 2:20pm on Monday 18th September 1944. Meeting slight opposition from the Germans, his squadron

took up defensive positions that evening about a mile south of the railway line at Wolfheze. At 11am on Tuesday 19th September, German fighter planes strafed the squadron, which then took up defensive positions in a wooded area. By 5pm, the squadron was trying to move the vehicles and guns that had been brought in by gliders to the south side of the railway line. This involved moving heavy transport across a railway embankment as the squadron moved on towards the outskirts of Oosterbeek. At 6pm the squadron came under German mortar fire during which the squadron found itself split in half and inserted into the line to fight as infantry. Each half stood their ground after repeated attacks, taking numerous casualties in the process. The field reports record fourteen men as "missing" during this encounter on the late afternoon of 19th September, and it may have been then that Philip was killed in action.

Early in October 1944, the Epps family received notification that Philip had been posted as missing in action on 25th September. This gave the family hope that he may have been taken prisoner and survived. They later learned that Philip had died while driving a jeep in Oosterbeek, the only person travelling in that jeep to have died. Philip is buried in the Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery in the Netherlands, He is also remembered among the 19 men on the Arnhem Roll of Honour for the 4th Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers at St Andrews Church, Church Lane, Glaston, Rutland in Leicestershire.

Philip was originally from the Old Wives Lees area near Chilham in East Kent. The family moved to Kennington in East Kent and

then to Mereworth in about 1941. Philip is therefore not recorded in the Mereworth baptism register, and he was born after the 1921 census was undertaken. He does not appear in the mini-census conducted in 1939.

Sapper Philip Sidney Epps

Lachlan Thomas Hayward (service number 6300303)

Lachlan, or "Tommy" as he was known to the family, was the eldest son of Thomas and Mary Hayward of Moorcocks Farm, Butchers Lane, Mereworth. The mini-census conducted in 1939, "the 1939 Register", records Lachlan Hayward as living at Bonnie Doon in Boughton-under-Blean near Faversham. The register gives his date of birth as 26th August 1922 (after the 1921 census had been conducted) and records his occupation as "farm assistant". Having been born in East Kent Lachlan is not recorded in the Mereworth baptism register.

He had enlisted into the Buffs on 14th May 1942 as a private, having previously been employed to drive tractors and lorries. He later transferred to the East Surrey Regiment. and held the rank of Lance Corporal. Lachlan was serving in the First Battalion when he was killed in action on 23rd April 1945 aged 22. He is buried in the Argenta Gap War Cemetery in Italy.

The 1st Battalion East Surrey Regiment had fought in France with the British Expeditionary Force in 1940 and had been evacuated from Dunkirk. It had then spent two years in England providing home defence in case of a German invasion. In June 1942 the battalion had been transferred to Algiers in North Africa, and had fought in the Tunisian Campaign until May 1943. The battalion then fought in Sicily before moving to Italy to liberate the country from fascist occupation. It saw much fighting throughout Italy including the battle for Monte Cassino in May 1944.

Lachlan's battalion, with only a brief respite, pursued the Nazi forces through Italy. After engagements during the winter of 1944 the battalion retired from the front line to prepare for a spring offensive in April 1945. The battalion then fought the intense action at the Argenta Gap with the objective of seizing a bridgehead. On 13 April the Allies were within a mile of the bridge before being forced back by a German Panzer Regiment. Renewed attacks were met by determined German resistance. The breakthrough came on 18th April 1945 but saw only a lessening of German resistance after the bridgehead had been secured. This allowed British forces to link up with American forces to encircle and defeat the German army defending Bologna. On 29 April the Germans finally surrendered, but by then Lachlan had already died.

Two pictures of Lachlan (courtesy of the Hayward family)

On 3rd May 1945 the Infantry Record Office wrote to Lachlan's parents, "*It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office notifying the death of Lance-corporal Lachlan Thomas HAYWARD which occurred in the Central Mediterranean theatre of war on the 23rd April 1945. He died of wounds."* Later in the month, on 22nd May, Major Charles Genilland, Lachlan's late Company Commander sent his sincere condolences to the family, and reported, "Your *son died of wounds received from a machine gun, whilst on patrol to an enemy occupied house. I have known your son for about 18 months & would like to say how much he was appreciated in the Company under my command. He was an excellent NCO, always cheerful & of very high courage. His fine sense of duty was a great example to other members of the Company & gave great confidence to those he led."*

On 24th May, the Reverend H C C Lannigan, a chaplain in the East Surrey Regiment, also wrote with deepest sympathy to Lachlan's father, saying, "*The advance in Italy was brilliantly successful, but it cost its price. Part of the price was your son's life. He died of wounds, but he didn't suffer. His wounds were such that he felt nothing. He has fallen in the greatest struggle in history. It is up to us to see that his death has not been in vain.*"

Lachlan's Commonwealth War Graves Commission records show him as "the son of Thomas and Mary Ann Hayward, of Mereworth, Kent." His grave inscription reads, "He lives with us in memory still, not just today but always will."

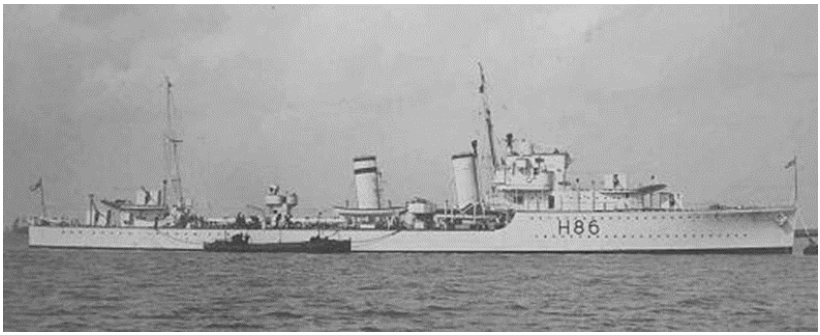
Lachlan's letters have survived. Wartime censorship prohibited correspondence to refer to anything other than private and family matters, and they contain no information about military campaigns. The letters reveal a young man who missed home. On 13th June 1943, he wrote, "*I wish I was at home now the strawberries are getting ripe. We manage to get a bit of fruit, but it's not so good as our English fruit.*"

His last letter home was written on 22nd April 1945, the day before he died. In it he wrote, "*I haven't got much news for you this time, I think you get it all in the papers now. I can't think of anything else, sorry this letter is not longer. So hoping this finds you all in the best of health as it leaves me at the present I'll say cheerio all the best. Your ever loving son, Tom.*" The letter arrived on 30th April, and, not knowing the terrible news, his mother replied saying, "*Many thanks for your very welcome letter. Glad to see by it that you were well. I expect that you are kept very busy. I guess by the time you get this letter the war with Germany will be finished. It's as good as finished now. What a relief, no V2 or doodlebugs now. Well Tom, I thought I had a lot of news but I don't seem to have very much after all. Have just had the news. Sounds good, looks as if you are almost finished over in Italy. You will soon be home again. I will be looking for another letter from you, trusting you are OK. Everybody sends you their love & God Bless you & may you be Home soon. Love Mum & Dad.*"

Lachlan was the last Mereworth casualty of the two World Wars. He fell on Saint George's Day 1945, only fifteen days before 8th May 1945, VE Day, when the war in Europe ended.

George Large (service number C/JX 139258)

George was an Able Seaman in the Royal Navy. Our War Memorial records him as having served on HMS Hood, a battle-cruiser that was sunk in a confrontation with the German battleship Bismarck on 24 May 1941. All but three of the Hood's 1,418 crew were killed in that encounter. Records held by the Royal Navy records and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, however, show George Large as having died on 10th January 1941 aboard HMS Gallant, a G-class destroyer.

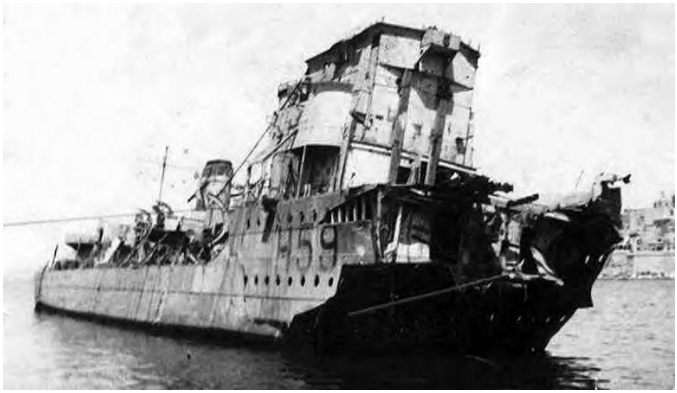


HMS Gallant

HMS Gallant had begun the war escorting ships in British waters. She took part in the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940 during which she had been damaged by German aircraft. Following repairs, she was then sent to Gibraltar, and in November 1940 was transferred to the Mediterranean Fleet to escort convoys.

HMS Gallant

On 10th January 1941, after meeting a military convoy between the island of Pantellaria and Tunisia, HMS Gallant hit a mine. The explosion separated the bow from the stern section, killing 65 of those on board, including George. The survivors were rescued by the destroyer Griffin, and the stern section of the Gallant was towed to Malta by the destroyer Mohawk for repair.



HMS Gallant after she had hit the mine

George is recorded as having died at sea and "missing – death on war service presumed" in Royal Navy records. He is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial.

George had been baptised at Mereworth church on 3rd February 1918, the son of labourer William Richard and his wife Eleanor Large of Butchers Lane. Royal Naval records give George's date of birth as 18th December 1917, and the War Graves Commission record that he died aged 23. Although Royal Navy records give his place of birth as Maidstone, the War Graves Commission record his parents as being William Richard and Helinor Large.

The 1921 census records the twins George and Joe, the 3-year-old sons of William and Mrs Large of Mereworth. William had been employed variously at the Queen's Head as a labourer and at Cannon Farm Wateringbury on "landwork". Mrs Large was a factory worker at the Sharps Factory in Maidstone. The twins were the youngest of the ten Large children (five boys and five girls, the oldest of whom was 22). In 1921, the entire family of twelve lived with their parents in a five-room house in Mereworth. George does not appear in the mini-census conducted in 1939, and we therefore do not know his occupation or whereabouts when war was declared.

The crew of HMS Gallant, one of whom is George Large

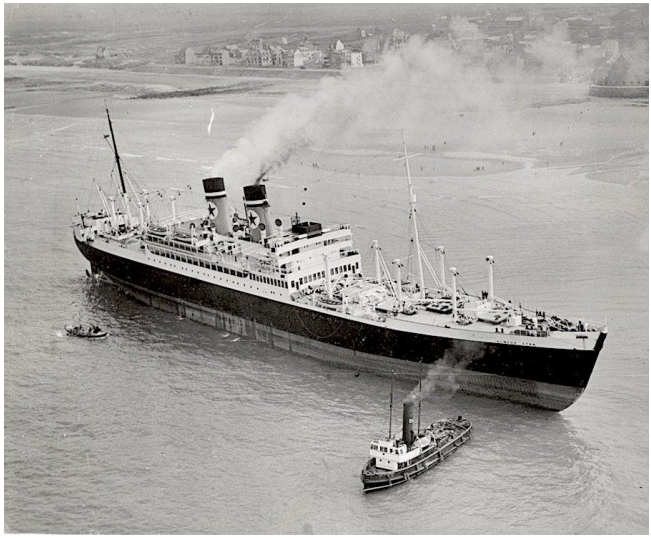
Bernard George Sears (service number as C/JX 213482)

George was an Ordinary Seaman in the Royal Navy. Our War Memorial records him as having served on RNSS Almeda Star This ship was a turbine steamer that, before the war, had been an ocean liner of the Blue Star Line taking passengers between South America and London. She was also a refrigerated cargo ship carrying refrigerated beef from South America to London. Both the Royal Navy and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission record Bernard as having died on 17th January 1941. The War Graves Commission gives his vessel as the S.S. Almeda Star, but the Royal Navy records him stationed at HMS Pembroke 1 (from 1940 this was the shore barracks at Chatham Dockyard). The same Royal Navy record, however, shows Bernard as having died at sea and "missing – death on war service presumed."

On 15th January 1941, the Almeda Star had sailed from Liverpool bound for Trinidad and South America with 142 members of the Fleet Air Arm and 52 other passengers. At 0745 hrs on 17 January 1941 Almeda Star was 65 km north of Rockall in heavy seas when German submarine U-96 torpedoed her amidships causing her to stop. She did not sink immediately, so U-96 fired again at 0805 and 0907 hrs. The Almeda Star was hit in the stern and again amidships. She launched four lifeboats and there were still people on deck when the submarine surfaced and opened fire with an 88mm deck gun as well as with incendiary shells. The fires from the 15 incendiary shells which hit the Almeda Star soon went out, so at 0955 hrs the submarine fired a fourth torpedo, which sank the Almeda Star within three minutes.

Seven Royal Navy destroyers responded to a distress message from Almeda Star, but their search found no survivors from the 360 people aboard, no wreckage and no sign of the lifeboats. The German U-boat escaped undetected.

The Royal Navy gives Bernard's date of birth as 18th May 1920, and the War Graves Commission records that he died aged 21. The Royal Navy gives Bernard's place of birth as Wrotham East, Kent, but the War Graves Commission records him as being the son of Grace Sears of Mereworth, Kent. Neither the Mereworth baptism register, nor the 1921 census record Bernard. The mini-census of 1939, however, records Bernard Sears, born 18th May 1920, as a farm worker living at 8 Beech Road, Herne Pound. Bernard is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial.



The RNSS Almeda Star on which Bernard Sears served

Dennis Aubrey Self (service number as C/SSX 27901)

Dennis was born in Mereworth on 12th February 1921, the son of agricultural labourer George Walter and Ellen Self of Butchers Lane, Mereworth, Kent. Dennis Aubrey Self was baptised at Saint Lawrence's on 1st May 1921. The 1921 census records a four-and-a-half-month-old Dennis, the youngest of ten children and son of G W Self, a Suffolk man living in Mereworth. Dennis is not recorded in the mini-census of 1939, but by 1940 he was an Able Seaman in the Royal Navy. He died at sea "on war service" on 18th May 1940, aged just 19.

Dennis served on HMS Princess Victoria. Launched in 1939, the MV *Princess Victoria* had been Britain's first stern-loading roll-on/roll-off cross-channel car ferry. In September 1939, after just two months service, the Admiralty requisitioned her, converted her to a minelayer and renamed her HMS Princess Victoria.

The MV Princess Victoria in 1939

Dennis's ship had been laying a minefield between Cromer and the Dutch coast, and was returning home on the night of 18th May 1940 when she hit a mine in the Humber Estuary. Richard Jefferson, writing in the *Glaven Historian* described what happened: *At 23.15 there was a terrific explosion which*

appeared to come from below the ship and to the starboard side of the centre line, forward of the bridge. The ship had hit a magnetic mine, probably dropped by a German aircraft. After 20 to 30 seconds the ship was listing 45 degrees, and 70 degrees within about 2 minutes. She touched bottom and eventually sank on an approximately even keel, leaving her mast, funnel and part of the bridge structure exposed. At the time of the explosion there were 17 officers and ratings either on the bridge, in the Chart House or in the Wireless/Telegraph Office. 12 of that number died. The force of the explosion probably blew them off the ship into the sea where they drowned if they were not already dead. At least, some of their bodies were swept south down the North Sea by the tides and currents, to be washed up on the beaches of North Norfolk a month or so later.

Although 85 crew members of the HMS Princess Victoria were rescued, 36, including Dennis, were lost. The *Eastern Evening News* of Tuesday 25th June 1940 reported: *The fourth body to be washed ashore at Sheringham within a week was recovered from the sea on Sunday. It is believed to be that of a Naval rating D. A. Self A.B.*

Dennis was buried on 25th June 1940 in Sheringham Cemetery, Norfolk. His headstone reads: *AND WHILE HE LIES IN PEACEFUL SLEEP HIS MEMORY WE ALWAYS KEEP. LOVING MUM, DAD & FAMILY*. Dennis is buried near Lieutenant-Commander Louis Alfred Lambert who died with him on the Princess Victoria.

Frank William Sparks (service number 6347471)

Frank had been born on 15th February 1919 and was baptised at Saint Lawrence's on 17th August 1919. He was the son of labourer John William Sparks and Bessie Sparks of New Pound, Mereworth. The 1921 census records a two-year-and-four-month-old Frank William Sparks in Herne Pound, Mereworth, the son of a general labourer on William Honey & Sons farm.

In 1921 Frank was living with his 32-year-old father John, his 28-year-old mother Bessie, who was from Snodland, and his two sisters, Ivy and Mabel. The 1939 mini-census shows that when war was declared, the 19-year-old Frank was a "poultry man" living in Beech Road, Mereworth. On the 11th, 18th and 25th January 1942, the Reverend Howard Mayne read out the banns of marriage for Frank William Sparks of Mereworth and Alice Hughes of Loose in Saint Lawrence's Church, Mereworth.

Our War Memorial shows Frank as having the rank of Lance Corporal in the Queen's Royal Regiment. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, however, records him as Private Frank William Sparks and a member of the 2/7th Battalion The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey).

Frank's battalion formed in 1939, and, in 1940, served in France before being evacuated to defend the Kent and Sussex coastline. It was posted to Iraq in 1942, and then took part in the Salerno landings in September 1943 as part of the campaign to liberate Italy from Fascist rule. The Italians, by then, had joined the Allied forces against German occupation. The battalion fought in Italy

for the rest of the war in a bitter and costly series of campaigns to secure river crossings and to break through the German lines. The German winter defence line, known as the Gustav Line, was not breached until 17th January 1944 when the Allies were able to cross the river Garigliano and take the town of Minturno.

Frank was killed in Italy on 4th January 1944 aged 24. He is buried in the Minturno War Cemetery in Italy, where his headstone reads: *IN MEMORY OF A GOOD HUSBAND AND SON AT REST. HIS LOVING WIFE AND MOTHER*. His military records show him as the son of John and Bessie Sparks, and husband of Alice Sparks of Mereworth, Kent. Frank had a younger brother, George, who also died in the war.

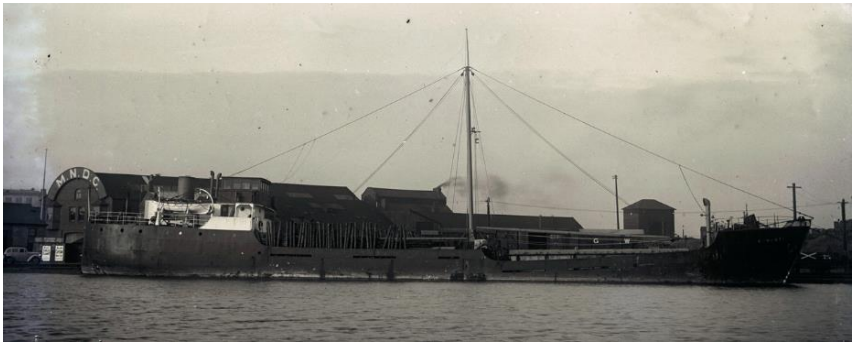
George Noel Sparks

Our War Memorial incorrectly gives George's second initial as "E", but our church registers show that George Noel Sparks had been baptised at Saint Lawrence's on 1st March 1925, the son of labourer John William Sparks and Bessie Sarah Anne Sparks of New Pound, Mereworth. George had been born on Christmas Day 1924. This was after the 1921 census had been conducted. His entry in the mini-census conducted in 1939 is not available to view. He was Frank William Sparks's younger brother.

George served in the Merchant Navy as Senior Ordinary Seaman on the M.V. Ashanti, and therefore did not have a service number. George was aged only 19 when he was killed off the Isle of Wight on 10th June 1944.

The Ashanti was a 534-ton steel engine-driven cargo vessel built in 1936. By 1944 she was armed with guns and had become a "Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship".

The Royal Navy temporarily requisitioned her to take cased petrol from Southampton to the Normandy beach head during the D-Day landings.



MV Ashanti c.1936

On 10th June 1944 the Ashanti was waiting at the invasion assembly point off St. Catherine's Point on the Isle of Wight, packed full of vital jerry-cans of petrol for tanks. As she waited for the rest of the convoy, a German E-boat fired a single torpedo at her. As it hit the Ashanti, she burst into flames and then, fuelled by the petrol, was destroyed by an enormous explosion which killed all ten crew as well as the seven gunners aboard. George was one of those seventeen men. He is remembered on the Tower Hill Memorial in London. Despite the many efforts George's family, we have as yet been unable to find a photograph of him. This booklet is dedicated to his memory.

Personal Memories of Wartime

Sylvia's account of Mereworth in the War Years

Mereworth was not a typical English rural village in World War Two. Not only was it in the flight path of the bombing raids on London, it also had a Royal Air Force aerodrome on its doorstep. In March 1990, Mrs Sylvia Clark recorded some of her war memories about life in Mereworth during those years. Sylvia, the sister of George Edward Boorman, grew up at 6 Pleasant Villas in Kent Street and during the conflict lived with her husband at Wheelers Cottage in the Street. Her father, Hubert Boorman, ran the former garage on the Street. Hubert built the Mereworth aeroplane for Reginald Balston, an early aviator, who lived at Mere House (the former rectory) between 1907 and 1913. The following is an edited version of Sylvia's account of her war years:

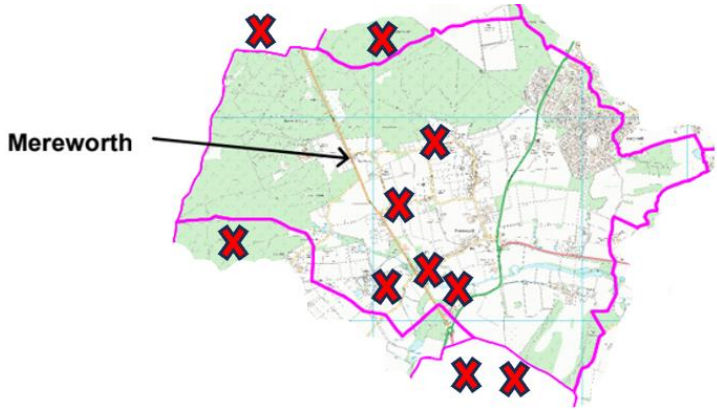
The Battle of Britain was perhaps the most hazardous period as German raids were mostly in daylight at the beginning. The siren would wail with fluctuating sound, signal for people to dive for the Anderson shelter. Lots of people used cellars (not a very good idea really). The drone of the approaching bombers would be heard, accompanied by their fighters. Our Spitfires would take off to intercept, the dog fights would develop. It was not always our planes coming off best. Our Spitfire pilots, should they have been fortunate enough to escape from their crippled planes were machine gunned by the German fighters as they parachuted down. It quite often happened that our Spitfires, if possible, would circle a parachutist, guarding him against the German

fighters until he landed safely. There were of course some Germans taken prisoner, we sometimes were warned a parachutist had managed to elude capture and therefore to be on our guard.

Regarding the gun emplacements, those in the village were mobile anti-aircraft guns, moved to different areas nightly. The first of the doodlebugs fell in the field above "Muddy Alley" [the footpath leading from the A26 to East Peckham old church] *above the hop pickers' huts south of Brewers Hall Farm. My husband and I remember this one very clearly. We were awakened by a terrific explosion early in the morning* [War Diaries record this "pilotless aircraft" to have exploded at 4:54 a.m. on 16th June 1944)*. We scrambled into our clothes and went hot foot in the direction from which it came. We were some of the first on the scene, civilians that is, the duty policeman was already there. We were not allowed very close as it, or what was left of it, was one of the first arrivals, and remains were required for examination.*

Another, I believe, actually landed on Viscount Falmouth's tennis court in very close proximity to Libbits [the Viscount then lived at Graythwaite on Seven Mile Lane. It was this flying bomb that probably skewed the old thatched barn at Barons Place Farm towards the explosion rather than away from it]*. It does sound rather complacent, but we did become quite used to this drone, and really took little notice unless the engine or method of propulsion became silent. Then we knew it was going to land somewhere; you looked to see which direction it was heading and*

the height, and judged where it would explode. After a while one became quite adept at this.



Approximate location of Doodlebug crashes in Mereworth (KM)

During the early period of the war, because the houses at the east end of Kent Street nearest the aerodrome were but a few hundred yards from take-off, the occupants were evacuated for a time. The Misses Jarrett (Alice and Hetty), stayed with my husband and me at Wheeler's Cottage during this period [Alice was one of four people tragically killed in June 1955 when a Meteor jet failed to take off and crashed into the Kent Street strawberry field in which she was working]. *My husband* [George Clark] *was a civilian employee at the aerodrome and was a member of the Mereworth Home Guard (firstly named LDV – Local Defence Volunteers). I think initially they had one rifle between them. Their venue was the building at the bottom of Butchers Lane on the Malthouse property - now their garage, I believe.*

In their early period the doodlebugs came mostly during the hours of darkness. The first one we saw, as the flame was at the rear, we thought was on fire. We soon learned this was not so; when the flame disappeared and the propulsion method became silent [we knew] it was coming down somewhere. The village, though, was very fortunate really as there was lots of open land where comparatively little damage resulted. The bombing raids were again a different story. Mostly the raids on London, of which quite a number came over the village area, were during darkness. I can recall a particular instance – a Sunday (definitely not a day of rest) daylight raid. The bombers came over at a high altitude, the usual drone making for London, our Spitfires etc. getting mixed up with the German fighter protection. At this time, we had a third member of the family, one of the assistants employed by Mr Gould lodging with us (Pam), She and I couldn't see enough on the ground, so we climbed on to our kitchen roof - access was quite easy by the top of the soft water tank. The kitchen roof at Wheeler's Cottage, was flat at that time. I can still see now, this German bomber making a bee line for us. I had never moved so fast, before or since, to get off that roof. We knew later that this was being forced down, still more or less intact, by our fighters to enable experts a close examination of the aircraft.

George [Sylvia's husband]*, as part of his duties at the drome, had some very gruesome tasks. At times, when our bombers had been on raids and were in doubt of making it back to their own base, they would make emergency landings on the drome. The drome was, of course, a fighter station, and during the whole period of the war, some or most of the legendary pilots were based there*

at some time – including "Cat's Eyes Cunningham". One of my friends and I used to attend dances held quite often in the mess of the various squadrons, especially the weeks when George was on a night shift.

During the war period, from around the time that invasion was a possibility, most garages were deprived of petrol sales. There was one appointed in each area from which all local rationed supplies were available. The profit obtained from these supplies was divided between all. Our pumps were taken over by the army for their fuel supplies. Paraffin and TVO (Tractor Vaporising Oil) were all rationed. During the hop picking season a special extra supply of paraffin was allowed – rationed, of course - to supply the influx of London pickers. They depended quite a lot on oil stoves for cooking and heating. All hop pickers' cooking was to be completed and fires out before dark. For the Sunday joint, quite a lot of pickers went to the local baker who charged 6d for cooking it in his oven.

The Germans became aware of our use of radar and dropped strips of a paper-like substance to interfere with its operation – also leaflets of propaganda. I still have one or two of these. There were also raids when incendiary bombs were dropped. We had one in the front garden and kept it for years as a reminder, but when we moved, we dumped it. Anti-personnel bombs were also used, one instance in particular I can remember. I used to walk to Teston on Sunday, after lunch to Old Tiles Restaurant [now the Crown City Restaurant] *to assist serving tea, as Mrs Penn, the then proprietress, became very busy around that time. I had*

almost arrived when this plane came, and dropped these anti-personnel bombs. I dived under the hedge, staying until all was quiet, then continued my journey. When arriving I found quite a lot of Old Tiles' windows blown out.

In the early war years, each person, male or female not home-tied or already enlisted, was required to help in the general war effort. I was going to volunteer for the ATS, but my better half put his foot down with a firm hand and said no. The local grocer in the shop, as it was then on Mereworth Cross, was told I was looking for essential work. As his male employees were on the point of being enlisted, he thought I might be of use, as I could drive and had done a certain amount of book keeping for my father [Hubert Boorman] *who was then running the cycle shop-cum-garage* [the former fuel garage and workshop in The Street]. *Hence, I was employed by Mr Gould with three other female employees. Mr Gould did a twice daily round by van to the various gun emplacements and camps around the aerodrome to supply the servicemen with cakes, buns, cigarettes etc. – in fact, more or less a mobile NAAFI! The times the warning went, tin hats were donned and you hoped your luck would hold!*

Eventually I taught the other female employees to drive and I was then given the job of book keeper. There was a mass of paperwork entailed with rationing. Periodical visits by a government food inspector were the order of the day. He did not notify beforehand of his visits. He used to call hoping I think to catch me on the hop. I christened him "Nitty Whiskers" as he had a beard. He came to ascertain whether the reserve stocks were

still intact, as each grocer, according to the number of registered customers he had, had been allocated sufficient reserve stock to enable him to supply his registered customers with their rations of butter, margarine, sugar, tea, bacon, cheese and preserves (a pound of jam or syrup if available once a month). This was an emergency provision should the weekly supplies become unavailable. I was employed by Mr Gould until November 1944 when I left after training a new assistant in the necessary paperwork. Our daughter was born in January 1945. By this time my father was unable to work due to ill health. As my husband was still at the aerodrome, I was the only available candidate for the garage-cum-shop – so for a time was housekeeper, mother, wife, and garage-cum-shop attendant. Obviously, I couldn't carry on with this indefinitely, the solution being domestic help. Mrs Jack Sparks (Margaret) was the godsend and stayed with us until things returned more or less to normal.

Mr Gould's grocery shop at Mereworth Cross where Sylvia worked in World War II

Hubert Boorman (centre), Sylvia's father, outside his garage-cum-shop in The Street

Where Sylvia and George Boorman grew up in Kent Street (Number 6 Pleasant Villas)

Roy's account of Mereworth in the War Years

The late Roy Gould lived in the parish all his life - 68 years (less the five years he spent in the army during World War Two) when he wrote down some of his memories. His memories give an insight into wartime life in a close-knit village that had no electricity, and which relied on crystal radios, village shops and a local bakery:

Before the War I knew every family in the village. My father was a grocer in the village for over 50 years: he wore a straw-hat winter and summer as his trade mark. In those days there was no central healing, only coal fires.

I recall Hubert Boorman. He had a growth on his forehead as big as a golf ball where he used to rest his glasses when he was doing any close-up work. He kept the local garage and sold petrol in 2-gallon cans before he had pumps put in. He also charged your accumulator for your wireless - cost 6 old pence - if it ran out mid-week before your spare was charged you had no wireless for the rest of the week. He was also an undertaker. There was no electricity then, this did not arrive until after the war.

Next door to the garage Tim Drake had his cobblers or snob's shop. The Post Office in The Street was owned by Willie Wyarth and they also had a bakery then, up until about 1946.

Arthur's Account of Mereworth in the War Years

Arthur Henry "Bill" Miskin was the son of Mr and Mrs Frank Miskin of Mereworth Lawn on Seven Mile Lane. He served as a Major in the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment and in June 1943 was awarded the Military Cross for outstanding courage and determination in close-quarter fighting in the North Africa campaign. He went on to fight in Italy, serving with the Mountain Warfare School. Recordings of his war memories are held by the Imperial War Museum and are available online. The following is a transcription of his memories of a German air raid in September 1940:

I was on leave at the beginning of September, at my home in Mereworth in Kent and we were playing tennis, and suddenly one of my sisters said, "For God's sake, what's happening?" And I looked up, and the sky was absolutely black, literally, with bombers. You've never seen anything so frightening in your life, really. Anyway, the local ack-ack from West Malling Aerodrome opened up, so we couldn't go on playing tennis. And we went inside, and actually from our attic in the house, you could see the London docks and, especially when it got dark, and the night bombing went on, you could see the bombs landing and the fires burning. It really was the most frightening sight. And my father who had been in the 14-18 War, he was in tears, and he said to me, "This is the end of the British Empire, my boy." Now, in today's rather cynical society, that probably sounds the most remarkably stupid remark. But the fact is, his generation, and to a lesser degree mine, they were really proud of being members

of the British Empire, and we were proud of our country. We were proud of being English, or British, and this was the most appalling blow that we had actually been invaded.

Well, of course, as the evening wore on, and we were up in the attic watching these bombs, my father said to me," You know, we shall lose this war." And I said, "Why on earth do you say that?" And he said," Well," he said, "I reckon that you chaps, your generation, haven't got the stomach for a fight, and that you won't be prepared to fight as hard as we did." I didn't say anything because he was so obviously het up, so he would never - he was a very fair-minded man - he would never have said that if he hadn't been under great strain - to do him justice anyway. When we were all assembled to go to North Africa - that was in 1942, November 42 - so this would have been October 42, I had a message from him saying - wishing me luck and that sort of thing - and saying, "Please disregard my remarks of two years ago. Of course, you'll be just as good as we ever were, and I'm sure you will do awfully well, and wish you the best of luck." And so that was the situation, but I don't think anybody can imagine what London went through. I know it's been well documented, and from my point of view, that's good enough, but we have a little Battalion reunion every year - we're down to about 15 now, of course - but we always drink the health of the people of London through the Blitz, because being a Home Counties Battalion, we always consider that they had, if anything, a worse time than we did - and really it was quite awful.

Ena's Account of Mereworth in the War Years

Mrs Ena Wickens (née Allman) was born in Mereworth in 1929, the daughter of Victor Allman, who had fought at Cambrai in the First World War, where he had rescued the French flag from the burning ruins of the town hall. She grew up in North Star Cottages at the top of Butchers Lane. Her father became a Special Constable in the West Malling police in the war. Ena, however, was aged only 10 when war was declared. She left school at the age of 14 in 1943 and went to work for Roy Gould's father in his shop at Mereworth Cross. Her account of childhood and adolescence in Mereworth has no dates, but it has been possible to link the following extracts to the war years:

There used to be five public houses in the village: The Queen's Head, The Torrington Arms, The Black Lion. The Beech Inn, and the Forge Gate which was bombed.

[The Queen's Head in Butchers Lane was run by James Speed throughout the war. It has recently been converted into several private dwellings. Charles Edward Fry was landlord at the Torrington Arms on the Street between 1927 and 1944; he was succeeded by William George Daish in 1945; the pub became a private house in 1999. The Black Lion in The Street was run by Horace John Smith between 1937 and 1945; it became a private house in 1957. The Beech Inn on Seven Mile Lane is still a pub but called the Moody Mare; the landlord throughout the war was John Stewart.

The Forge Gate, which was hit by a German bomb on 12th February 1941, is now a private house on the A26 Tonbridge Road just west of the Tonbridge Road/Seven Mile Lane roundabout. The pub is not actually in Mereworth parish, but was always considered a village pub.

War diaries from 12 February 1941 report that at 2:20a.m., four bombs fell on Forge Gate, one of which failed to explode. An inspection at 4:20a.m. found two craters in the A26 opposite the inn. The third bomb had fallen on the corner of Forge Gate Inn, badly damaging it, and requiring the evacuation of its occupants. The farmhouse and two cottages suffered only slight damage, but were evacuated due to the presence of the unexploded bomb on the side of the road. The A26 had to be closed between Goose Green and Seven Mile Lane for the clear-up.]

Ena's account continues: *The landlady of the Torrington Arms was Mrs Fry. She had her three grandsons living with her. Eric, the eldest one, played the church organ for the services. A lot of children and teenagers went to the service this particular Sunday evening and were early. Eric started to play "The Lambeth Walk". A lot of the children got up from their seats and were dancing in the aisle, when in came the verger, Mr George Saunders. He was very cross and sorted everyone out and had them back in their seats in no time.* [Eric was called up for military service in 1942].

The petrol station in The Street was owned by Mr Boorman. He was called Blacky Boorman. There was just one petrol pump in those days. The bulk of his work seemed to be repairing cycles and mending punctures. He used to work until midnight, and

sometimes after, doing repairs. He sold paraffin, and you would often see him on his old cycle, which had a rack on the front, delivering paraffin to his customers. The shop was taken over by his daughter and son-in-law, Mrs Sylvia and Mr George Clark – they ran it until they retired.

-0-

These personal accounts of wartime contrast with the lack of news in the censored wartime newspapers. War Diaries, which recorded incidents of enemy action, and the school log book verify these personal accounts. For example, in the nine months from August 1940 to April 1941, War Diaries recorded ten bombing incidents in and around Mereworth. These involved high explosive as well as incendiary bombs.

While some of the bombs failed to explode on impact, controlled explosions by Bomb Disposal Squads often caused damage to windows and ceilings, as did our own anti-aircraft shells. Most bombs fell in open country, although in August 1940 one of these hit a water main. In March 1941, another caused a night-time fire in Mereworth Woods where there was no water to fight it. On 21st February 1941 a German bomb scored a direct hit on Snodland Gasworks, and Mereworth was without gas until 4th March 1941. Neighbouring villages had no gas for much longer, but Mereworth's supply was restored when gas was diverted from Maidstone. Despite high explosive bombs twice falling close to Mereworth Castle in October and November of 1940, the castle was spared damage and there were no casualties.

Brenda's Account of the War Years

Brenda Pantrey is one of Mereworth's most longstanding residents. She has lived in Mereworth since her marriage in 1952. She was born in 1928 and grew up in Capel. She married Albert Henry Pantrey, who had originally lived in the houses that were demolished when the airfield was extended during the war. Albert's family was rehoused to the home in which Brenda still lives. Albert had been born in 1924. When war broke out, he had been employed at a furniture factory in Maidstone, to which he had to cycle each day.

When Albert (pictured opposite) was called up for military service he joined the Royal Air Force and was posted to RAF Lossiemouth and RAF Kinloss until he was demobbed. His job was to repair aircraft that had been damaged, and to return them to active service. The pilots of the repaired aircraft did not always trust the repairs, and would not fly the planes unless somebody who had made the repairs went up with them for the test flights over the North Sea. Albert was always anxious about not having tightened everything when he was airborne. On one occasion the pilot said, "I hope you lot can swim!" The plane dashboard had failed to show that the undercarriage had descended for landing. Thinking they might have to ditch in the sea, the pilot realised that if he circled the airfield, the ground crew would be able to signal to indicate whether the landing gear had come down. Fortunately it had, and they landed safely; an indicator light had been faulty.

The RAF thought Albert good enough to be a Flight Engineer in the Fleet Air Arm, but after the undercarriage experience, he declined the offer, as it would have involved bombing raids on enemy ships.

Although Albert was not a combatant, he witnessed tragedies nonetheless. A young pilot had passed all his tests to fly Spitfires, but on his maiden flight, he had not realised how little visibility there was in front of the plane when taking off and landing. He crashed as a result. Albert and a colleague ran to help him out of the plane, but the pilot was dead by the time they had pulled him out of the cockpit.

George Pantrey was Albert's brother. He had joined the Army when he was called up, but had been sent for training in Mereworth Woods. He used to pop home to see his mother while there. He was eventually sent off to Italy to fight.

Brenda and Albert c.1950

At the end of the war, Albert went back to his former workplace to ask for his job back. Unfortunately, the factory was only employing married men, and he was therefore obliged to find work elsewhere. He went to work for Robert H. Hall & Co at Paddock Wood. This was a wood mill, and in the war, after she had left school, it was where Brenda Pantrey (then Miss Kemp) had begun work. It was there, after the war, that Brenda and Albert met.

Brenda's wartime job at Halls had been making ammunition boxes, as well as prefabricated sections for the huts that would house soldiers. At the end of the war, she had just turned 17 and had become skilled at using machinery for making mortise and tenon joints for window frames.

Brenda experienced a lot of the bombing raids of World War Two, as well as seeing the soldiers returning from the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940. As a young girl she had gone with her mother to Paddock Wood Station where trains bringing the soldiers home had temporarily halted. Soldiers were urgently reaching out of carriages, handing addressed letters to anyone who would take them, affix a stamp and send the letters home to the soldiers' families. Brenda and her mother recognised a cousin among the faces but he was not allowed out to see them. He had been a stretcher bearer at Dunkirk and was still covered in blood. His family lived at Fairwarp in Sussex, but his mother died before he was able to return home to her.

Brenda spent some time in Cornwall where her father had gone to build an airfield. She had gone down by train to Plymouth with her mother in 1940. Their train pulled in just as the first air raid took place on the city, and they had to make for an air raid shelter immediately on arrival. The family lived in a farm cottage in Cornwall and slept under the stairs for safety. The farmer did not believe that Cornwall would be at much risk of air raids, and so had been lax about showing a light by leaving open his door. Brenda had become accustomed to the sound of German aircraft over Kent. One evening, therefore, when she heard German planes approach, she and her parents jumped under the kitchen table as enemy bombs fell on the farm, lighting everything up as

if it were daytime. She believes that they were targeted because the farm buildings looked like an army camp. Fortunately, there were no casualties, but the farmer had learned his lesson.

Of all the challenges of the war, Brenda considers doodlebugs to have been the worst. She has said that the war "*upset all the pleasure,*" and that the air raids meant that she did not even wish to go to a cinema during the conflict. She remembers that she was always uneasy about being seen out, because the Nazis "*didn't mind who they shot at.*"

In 1944, when Brenda was working at Halls in Paddock Wood she witnessed the interception of a doodlebug. She was between the factory and the air raid shelter, and looking up she saw a Spitfire shooting at a doodlebug. The flame on the pilotless aircraft went out, and it began descending towards Paddock Wood railway station. The Spitfire pilot then flew under the doodlebug and, manoeuvring the tip of his wing under the wing of the flying bomb, tilted the bomb so that it glided down to avoid the station.

Gordon Knight had been another of Brenda's cousins. His father had been a policeman in Chatham during the war, arresting those who strayed too close to military bases. Gordon's father had warned him never to volunteer for anything while serving in the armed forces. Gordon joined 40 Squadron of the RAF Volunteer Reserve as a sergeant. One day in August 1941, his own plane was out of action, and he volunteered to take the place of a crewman who was too ill to fly in another plane. Gordon never returned from that flight over Belgium. His mother did not want his name put on the Paddock Wood War Memorial at the end of the war, because it would have been too bitter a reminder of a dear son. Nonetheless, his name has been added.

Memories of Mereworth

In 2018 Mrs Sheila Clarkson (née Fermor) and Mr Michael Knowles collaborated to produce *Memories of Mereworth*, a book of personal memories of growing up in the village. Sheila moved to Mereworth after the war, but Michael lived in Mereworth throughout the war. Michael sadly died in 2023.

Michael had been born in 1938 to William and Helena, and lived in a small bungalow to the rear of the Queen's Head in Butchers Lane. Michael's father was called up for military service in the Royal Engineers during the war and was demobbed in 1946. Michael's mother had taken him, aged 5, to relations in Blackpool in July 1944 "*because of the Doodlebugs*." He came back to Mereworth after about three months as Doodlebug activity had become sporadic. The Mereworth School attendance register shows Michael as having "gone to Blackpool" as from 28th July 1944.

Michael's accounts in *Memories of Mereworth* record some of the parishioners who survived the conflict. He wrote:

Peg and Tom Weller lived on the left-hand side of Beech Road between Herne Pound and Horne's Lane in an orchard in a type of converted furniture removal van. Tom was very good with cars. He was in the paratroopers during the war. Soon after he came out he could be seen careering around the village on one of the new Corgi small-wheel mini-motorbikes. I remember him crashing through a hedge on it in Butcher's Lane.

The picture above is from the background of a 1950s photograph. It shows a painting of the Queen's Head, with the great elm tree in Butcher's Lane still standing. Michael Knowles recalled:

I remember that being painted by a vagabond Irish artist, Peter Kennedy, who slept in one of the outhouses of the inn. I vividly remember old Mr Jimmy Speed, the landlord, going over to that outhouse, behind our bungalow, to have a fight with him for some reason during the war!

Michael Knowles in the courtyard of the Queen's Head in 1940
with Peter Hollands' Morris 10 behind

Mereworth in the War Newspapers

The Newspapers during the war years continued to mention normal life, such as marriages, car accidents, Women's Institute meetings and criminal charges brought against those who stole apples. There was very little mention of the war, and no mention of the people of Mereworth who were serving in the forces or who fell. A scan of the newspaper reports from Mereworth between 1939 and 1945, however, found the following:

The Market Harborough Advertiser and Midland Mail of Friday 24 April 1942 reported: *The B.E.M. has also been won by Pte. Ernest Frederick George, Pioneer Corps, of Southdown, Great Yarmouth who, when a British aircraft crashed in flames at Mereworth Woods, Kent, entered the plane and saved the observer's life after first being forced back by fumes, Verey light cartridges were exploding at the time.*

The Liverpool Daily Post of Wednesday 30 December 1942 reported: *HOME GUARD RECTOR FINED: When the Rev. Howard Bertram Mayne, rector of Mereworth, near Maidstone, a lieutenant in the Home Guard was fined £1 at West Malling yesterday for failing to immobilise a motor-car and to deposit certain parts with the police, he said: "The only thing I can do is to chuck up my commission and to be finished with it."*

The Kentish Express of Friday 7 January 1944 reported: Pte. T. Sutton, Mereworth Home Guard, fired a rifle over the house of Mr Arthur Chapman at Mereworth because Mrs Avis, a friend of his and tenant of Mr Chapman, had been turned out of her house. At the police court he was fined £2.

Mereworth Parish Magazine in the War Years

In the 1980s the church had a complete set of Parish Magazines, which has since been lost. The archive covered the war years and gave a fascinating insight into the wartime spirit of Mereworth residents. The Reverend Howard Mayne continued to explain the scriptures and made only passing references to the nuisance of the war. Before the war had even ended, the magazine reported that the Parish Council was planning main drainage for the village; this plan was not actually realised until the early 1980s! Mrs Elizabeth Earl read through all those wartime parish magazines in the 1980s and then wrote the following article:

The Second World War must have had a profound effect on life in Mereworth. It is interesting that in the Parish Magazine for the period, although the subject of the hostilities was given some coverage, the editorial emphasis seemed to be on the preservation of a stable village community. The magazines gave a strong sense of continuity and purpose. The war inevitably changed lives, but it was more important to ensure that the community was brought through the conflict in good heart than to be needlessly sidetracked by international issues.

This does not mean that Mereworth tried to ignore the war; indeed, it was well prepared for it. The following notice appeared in the September 1938 issue of the Parish Magazine:

AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS: A course of seven Lectures for men and women will be given in Mereworth Schools by Miss Dorothy Smith (Assistant County Gas Officer) beginning on Monday, October 3rd at 7:30 pm. There will be no charge for the course, and everyone who can is urged to attend.

When the war became a reality there were many schemes to boost the War Effort. As always, the Women's Institute was prominent in the organisation of these. Below is an extract from the Parish Magazine for May 1941:

MEREWORTH JAM (W.I. SCHEME): Arrangements are being made to start a jam making centre at Mereworth Schools Cookery. The Committee was elected at a public meeting at Mereworth Institute on April 3rd and has already received promises of help from over 30 competent women.

The jam making was successful. In October 1941 it was announced that the Women's Institute Preserving Centre "closed down on 17th September with the really amazing total or 8,200 pounds of jam made." Although the Village was situated in the heart of a fruit growing area, and therefore at a distinct advantage when it came to jam making, it must still have been gratifying to learn that "Mereworth was first in all England for quantity of jam made." Readers of the Parish Magazine were given this news in February 1942.

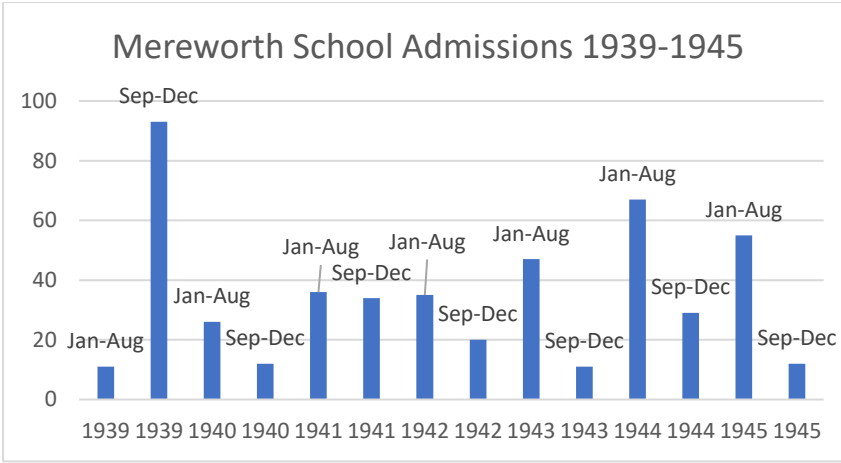
In many ways the history of the Jam Making Centre seems to typify Mereworth's response to the war, at least according to the official version recorded in the Parish Magazine. What the village did, it did superbly, but it restrained itself to service in the areas in which it knew it could do well. Mereworth was aware that, catastrophic though the war might be, it was important to preserve the continuity of rural life, and the pursuit of country matters. It was this sense of single-minded purpose which preserved Mereworth's rural character well into the 1980s.

Mereworth School in Wartime

In 2006, Mereworth School celebrated its 150th year and published a booklet about its history. Wartime headteachers were Mr H. S. Tapping (from 1913 to 1941) and Miss Minnie Vennell (from 1942 to 1950). This is how the booklet described wartime: *In the Second World War numbers were swelled by evacuees from London. These evacuees later left when the Battle of Britain was raging overhead. The school was given its own air raid shelter in 1940 which can still be seen in the car park. In 1944 a V1 flying bomb landed very close to the school causing considerable damage.*

The booklet referred to the doodlebug that exploded at 12:25pm on 21st August 1944 just south of the crossroads near the school. It was the last of five V1s to damage the school, after the repairs from earlier serious blast damage on 13th February 1944. This doodlebug damaged 20 other properties as well as the school chimney, windows, doors, ceilings and school house. Children were still in school that day, as the hop-picking holiday had not yet started, and they had quickly been ushered into the Air Raid Shelter. As with all doodlebugs that fell on Mereworth from June to late August 1944, there were fortunately no casualties.

The School Admissions Register shows how the war disrupted pupil intake. Before the war, the school had admitted around 30 local children each year. During the war, some village children had been evacuated elsewhere, but when Autumn term began on 2nd October 1939, of 166 children on roll, 77 were evacuees.



The evacuees were mostly from a Woolwich school, but some came from as far away as Coventry. All of them stayed with local people. Four evacuees, between the ages of 5 and 9, were shown as living at Mereworth Castle. By the end of 1939, however, at least 58 of the evacuees had returned home, often because "*mother missed children*". Throughout the war school attendance was fluid as children left and were then re-admitted. In May 1942, there were still 23 evacuees at the school. In those days most children stayed on at the school until the age of 14.

Later in the war there was also an influx of children from seasonal workers. For example, five children were admitted on 18th May 1943 from London families living in Brewers Hall huts. These returned to London on 27th August that year. On 24th July 1944, six traveller children were admitted, but "*left the district*" on 2nd August 1944. The six had been living in Grove Farm huts for those ten days. Children from the RAF West Malling married quarters did not began to arrive at the school until 1948.

The Mereworth School Log Book for the war years is an uncensored daily account of the preparations for and effects of the conflict on the teachers and pupils at the school. The school holidays were taken at Christmas, Easter, fruit picking time (normally the last two weeks of June) and hop-picking time (usually five weeks from the end of August to early October). War had therefore been declared during the hop-picking holiday of 1939, but teachers were already managing the evacuees in mid-September 1939. By the time the school re-opened on 2nd October, there were so many children to manage that the village hall in Butcher's Lane was hired to take two classes of evacuees.

The early part of the war was known as the "Phoney War." The home-front hostilities began later in 1940. Nevertheless, the German air Force was busy photographing our defences in 1940:

From a 1940 German Luftwaffe aerial photograph (National Archives)

In 1940, the German Air Force would have seen Mereworth before the extension of West Malling Aerodrome over the eastern end of Kent Street, the building of the Airfield Estate, or the clearance of woodland to the north of the parish (now a quarry). The Luftwaffe's focus of attention was the airfield to the north of the village, where preparations were being made to defend our country against aerial bombardment.

On 22nd December 1939 the school broke up for a quiet week-long Christmas holiday. The remaining evacuees had been invited to tea at the rectory on the following Monday (Christmas Day) and to Yotes Court for tea on the 27th. Everybody started school on 1st January, which in those days was not a bank holiday.

By the middle of June 1940, the school was seeking permission to build an air raid shelter "*flush on the east wall of the girls' playground, extending into the garden of school house*". By 17th June, small mesh wire netting had been fitted to protect the windows of the school rooms and cloakrooms. Contractors turned up on 4th July to tender for the shelter and by 15th July the successful company was told to get on with the work "at once". Work began on 24th July. On 8th August 1940 the school had its first air raid warning at 1130. The children remained in school until the "all clear" an hour later. The Battle of Britain had begun.

On 16th August there had been an air raid the previous evening, and attendance was down to 35 children. That day there was an air raid during their dinner hour. On 23rd August, the headmaster noted that attendance had been low all week due to air raids, and that the school was closing for four weeks for the hop-picking holiday. During the holiday, the break was extended twice, and the school did not open until 7th October. When the

school finally opened for the 1940 autumn term, only half the children attended at any one time – half the children in the morning, and the other half in the afternoon. As a welcome back, there was an air raid at 0950, with the children having to stay in the shelter until 1130, and then another at 1300 when all those arriving for their first day back went straight into the shelter for their first two hours. Throughout October 1940 the children spent a lot of time in the shelter due to repeated air raids. Attendance finally returned to "normal conditions" on 5th November. As a consolation, when the school broke up on 20th December for a two-week Christmas holiday, Mr Harmsworth at the Castle presented each child with a Christmas gift.

Lighting was not installed in the school air raid shelter until 22nd August 1941. It was powered by an accumulator, as there was no electricity in the village. When the school broke up for the 1941 Christmas holiday, Mr Tapping, the headmaster, decided to retire after 28 years and one month's service. Miss M. Vennell BA (Hons) London took up duties as headteacher when the school reopened on 5th January 1942.

When the school closed for the hop-picking holiday in August 1942, Miss Vennell tried to organise weekly games, gardening and other holiday activities for the children. Unfortunately only three children ever turned up for these activities and she decided to drop the idea. All seemed to have settled down in the village, until the tragic death of a child on his way home from school on 13th October 1942. In a case of accidental death, the boy had been killed by an army searchlight trailer in the village.

There were no accounts of warfare in the log for 1943. During the fruit-picking holiday of 1943, Miss Vennell opened the school

between 6 and 7 every evening between 19th and 26th June for "Wings for Victory Week". This raised £101 18s 6d towards a Spitfire to help the war effort (about £5,660 in today's money).

In 1944, the school log once again mentions air raids. The raid on the evening of 13th February 1944 caused such extensive damage that the school had to close for a week. When the school reopened on 21st February, only two rooms could be used. Miss Vennell recorded "*air raid practice at 9:10am*" on 24th February as a precaution. On 6th June 1944 she proudly wrote, "*D-Day – shelter practice taken & warning re military traffic and dumps given.*" By 16th June, however, she closed the school a day early for the fruit picking holiday after the first doodlebug exploded in Mereworth. While the blast broke two windows at the school, most damage over the next two weeks was due to shrapnel from anti-aircraft gunfire. The base of an anti-aircraft shell fell through the roof of the school house in which she lived, "*letting in water*."

Throughout July and August 1944, the school log records the number of "shelter periods" when children were required to take cover. When school reopened on 10th July there were four shelter periods, on some days there were none and on others as many as eight. In all, the log records 36 shelter periods between 10th and 27th July 1944, as well as all the structural damage caused by the flying bombs and anti-aircraft shells. At 2pm on 15th July anti-aircraft fire managed to hit a V1 flying bomb over Grove Farm, and it exploded in mid-air. The debris was scattered over a quarter of a mile and the blast took tiles off the school roof. It is hard, 80 years on from those events, to imagine how teachers coped with such dangers to the children in their care!

Mereworth Church in Wartime

The Parish Magazine of January 1942 carried the following words from the Reverend Howard Mayne: *We welcome the new school mistress and hope she will be happy here. She comes with her parents, and I understand they are not slack in attendance at Divine Worship.*

Parochial Church Council meetings were held throughout the war. A meeting on 5th September 1944 reported: *The first War Damage to the Church amounted to £12:16:0 which had been recovered from the War Damage Commission. Further damage had not yet been assessed.* In the September 1944 parish magazine, however, the Reverend Howard Mayne had more pressing matters on his mind: *CHURCHYARD: It is somewhat disappointing, when a few of us try to keep the churchyard in some sort of order, to find decaying wreaths thrown in any corner, out of sight – until the grass is cut. Would it not be possible to place this unwanted matter in the place assigned for such? Personally I think so. H. B. Mayne Rector.*

Their next meeting was held in the Merefolk Club Room on Wednesday 11th April 1945 - a month before the war ended. Victory was already in the air, despite the fighting that continued across Europe. During the meeting the following question came up: *The Rector was asked what arrangements would be made for a Service of Thanksgiving on VE Day. He said that a Service would be held probably both morning and evening.*

In the event, the rector held a Victory Service at 7pm on 8th May 1945, the day after Germany had surrendered on their western

front, but some hours before Germany signed the official Instrument of Surrender. On Sunday 13th May at Saint Lawrence's, Howard Mayne, the rector, held services of *Thanksgiving for Victory in Europe*: Holy Communion at 8am, Matins at 11am, a children's service at 3pm and Evensong at 6:30pm.

After the war, the church needed to be repaired, and the Parochial Church Council employed an architect to assess the damage. In December 1945 the church resolved to set up a Restoration Fund to raise up to £3,000 (£160,000 in today's money) to do the following:

1. *Repair & Restoration of the Church Tower and Spire*
2. *Demolition of the interior panelling of the Church where attacked by dry-rot and replacement of same.*
3. *Repair and Restoration of the cracks in the Church ceiling damaged by blast from bombs.*
4. *Installation of modern heating system.*
5. *Installation of Electric Lighting as soon as it becomes available.*

A plaque outside the church shows that the money was raised for this work. It reads: *To the glory of God and in memory of those of this parish who fell in the 1939-1945 War and in humble thanks for victory the village community of Mereworth did restore this church tower and spire of Saint Lawrence to its former beauty in the year of our Lord 1946.* Electricity, however, was not installed in the church until 1949, and the electric lighting was then donated by named parishioners in memory of their relatives.

The church had been damaged twice in 1944. On 13th February a stick of bombs had fallen nearby, breaking some windows and

displacing roof slates. This was all repaired by the end of May. In August, however, one of the last flying bombs to fall on the village had shattered more windows, including a stained-glass window. This was probably the 1567 Fane window in the mausoleum, which shows signs of repair, each broken piece having been put back in place with new lead fixing (see below). The blast had also opened a crack at the apex of the arched plaster ceiling. Repairs cost £38, but were only temporary. In October 1946, the churchwarden complained to the Diocese of Rochester that panes of glass were still missing, and that wood holding the glass had become loose. It took until 1950 for the "urgent" repairs to the stained glass finally to be completed.

As a postscript to the restoration of the church, the parish Magazine recorded: *Village Fete August 1946: It would be nice, first of all, to recognise with gratitude the help received from the kind friends outside the village, who came to help us in several ways. Major Kenneth Dalgliesh, FRIBA, the architect in charge of the Restoration, who served throughout the 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 wars and, as all could see lost an arm, was the worthy representative of the ex-servicemen of the village.*

Prisoner of War Camp at Mereworth Castle

Following D-Day increasing numbers of German soldiers became prisoners of war. By 1946 there were more than 400,000 Italian and German PoWs in Britain and repatriation was of these prisoners was not completed until 1948. By 1946, PoWs made up a quarter of Britain's agricultural workforce.

In 1945 Mereworth Castle accommodated German Working Camp 267. Few records have survived other than re-educational survey visit reports between January 1946 and December 1948 in the National Archives at Kew. These reports were part of the de-Nazification process, designed to undo the years of Nazi indoctrination. The PoWs were put to work on local farms. One PoW, Gerhard Burghardt who worked at Brewers Hall Farm, did not return to Germany and married Pamela Rich in 1948.

Sheila Clarkson in Mereworth Memories writes: *Two German PoWs encamped at Mereworth Castle worked at Highlands Farm, Henry (Heinrich) and Gerhard Burghardt. Henry, from Berlin, was married with a daughter about my age and showed us her photo. Gerhard was younger and very tall with blonde hair - possibly from Czechoslovakia.*

Graffito on Mereworth Castle folly, Park Road

Mereworth Women and the War Effort

Una Fermor was Sheila Clarkson's aunt. Una moved back to her home at North Star Farm, Mereworth when the war started in 1939. Her father, Albert Edward Fermor ran the farm and Una helped him until she was conscripted into the National Fire Service. She was based at the Area Establishment Office, Linton Park, near Maidstone for the rest of the war where she rose to the rank of Assistant Group Officer. On 27th May 1945 she married Bernard Carpenter, who had recently been released from a Prisoner of War Camp. The wedding took place at Saint Lawrence's Church, Mereworth. In the photograph below, Una's mother, Mary is on the far right of the group, and Una's father is third from the right. Una's brother Arnold is second from the left.

Una's wedding day in May 1945 (courtesy of Sheila Clarkson)

In August 1941, the Auxiliary Fire Service amalgamated with local authority fire brigades to form the National Fire Service. Women were recruited into the service to act as telephonists, despatch riders, drivers, canteen workers and "for many other duties" including fire watching and managing communications networks. By 1943, some 70,000 women had enrolled in the National Fire Service. While these women were not required to fight fires during the war, they were trained and were often called upon to attend the aftermath of enemy bombing raids.

Una Fermor in the uniform of an Assistant Group Officer © Sheila Clarkson

Another wartime occupation for women during the conflict was the Women's Land Army. Originally formed in 1917, the Land Army was reformed in 1939 to provide replacement labour for the men who had been conscripted into the armed forces. The government was also keen to increase the amount of food grown within these shores. By 1944, the Women's Land Army had more than 80,000 members, all doing the heavy work that men had previously carried out. The women were employed by the farmers on whose land they worked, and were often local women. In many cases, however, women were brought in from outside and lived locally while they helped with the war effort.

Members of the Women's Land Army at Hermitage Farm Barming in 1943/4 The late Dorothy Kimber, far left, is sitting on the tractor. Her family still has close ties to Mereworth. (Colourised postcard, private collection)

References and Acknowledgements:

The research, on which this booklet was based, was undertaken using documents held in the *Kent Archives and Local History Service* and on the internet – both from primary documents deposited online as well as from secondary online sources including Wikipedia. I have attempted, wherever possible, to cross-reference my various sources for the purposes of corroboration and accuracy of the information presented here. I have acknowledged many of my sources throughout the booklet, but I should like particularly to acknowledge the following sources of information:

1. *The British Newspaper Archive.*
2. *The Glaven Historian number 8: "HMS Princess Victoria and war graves in North Norfolk Churchyards by Richard Jefferson"*
3. *The Commonwealth War Graves Commission database*
4. *The Findmypast database*
5. *The National Archives*
6. *Records held by Mereworth Parochial Church Council*
7. *"Memories of Mereworth" by Sheila Fermor Clarkson and Michael Knowles (Doublegates Publishing 2018)*
8. *Clarke, Gillian S (2006) German prisoners of war in Britain, 1940-1948: Policy and performance.. thesis, Swansea University.*
9. *The London Fire Brigade: Firefighters of the Second World War.*
10. *The Malling Society: Mereworth, Offham & West Peckham – Inns & Beerhouses and their Keepers*
11. *MEMORIES OF WEST MALLING AND ITS VILLAGES: The Beat Project 2013*

I am indebted to the following people who generously provided photographs, letters and stories for this booklet: The late Sylvia Clark, Mrs Sheila Clarkson, Mrs Ann Fisher, The late Roy Gould, Mrs Rosina and Mr Nigel Hayward, Mrs Janice Palmer, Mrs Brenda Pantrey and Mrs Lynn Pantrey.

The publication of this booklet has been generously funded by Mereworth Parish Council:
https://mereworthparishcouncil.gov.uk/

This booklet is dedicated to the memory of George Sparks who, on 10th June 1944 as a Senior Ordinary Seaman in the Merchant Navy, died in the service of his country while providing essential fuel to support the D-Day operation. He was just 19 years old.

The booklet has been produced with the generous funding of Mereworth Parish Council, and is on sale to raise money for:

mna 30 years 1989 - 2019

mna
The Merchant Navy Association
from ship to shore, from past to present

And for the

Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund

Suggested donation for this booklet: **£5**